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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9551

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2882

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0703

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0579

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1155

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1333

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1827

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0598

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001119

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/16/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KIRF SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: LIFE FOR JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES NOT LIKELY TO IMPROVE IN THE NEAR TERM

REF: A. ASHGABAT 1081

¶B. ASHGABAT 1040

¶C. ASHGABAT 1094

Classified By: CHARGE RICHARD E. HOAGLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Post met with the leader of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan and with one member who is currently serving a suspended sentence after refusing compulsory military service. The conversation with these individuals underscored the fact that little has yet changed in how the government treats members of this group in prison and in society. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Post met October 16 with one of the two young Jehovah's Witnesses who remain under house arrest, serving out their suspended sentences for refusing compulsory military service (ref A). The head of Jehovah's Witnesses here, Andrei Zhanov, also came. This past summer, Bayram Ashyrgeldyev spent a month in pre-trial detention and another 20 days after his sentencing in a prison in Yashlyk, about an hour outside of Ashgabat. After his release from prison, he went to a sanitorium to recuperate from a variety of skin and infestation-related problems that arose during his incarceration, but his family was unable to pay for his treatment there for more than a week or two.

¶3. (C) Ashyrgeldyev described his incarceration as something from out of the dark ages. At the Yashlyk prison, twenty-three prisoners were housed in a 20-foot by 40-foot room, which was kept dark and infested with bedbugs and lice. He claimed that the food, consisting of bread and soup, was minimal, and when his family sent packages with additional food, prison authorities confiscated it. He suffered from skin allergies, which worsened during his incarceration, and other health problems, but the authorities also confiscated medication his family sent to him, and refused to provide him with medical assistance.

¶4. (C) After international attention focused on his case,

the government released him from prison to house arrest. He said that after he received the suspended-sentence notice, it quickly became clear to him that the authorities had no intention of withdrawing their attention from him. Upon release from prison, Ashyrgeldyev was instructed to return to the local military draft commission, which was responsible for finding him work. Authorities at the commission, however, refused to stamp his paperwork unless he promised to serve in the military in the future. A vicious circle ensued, he said, when he discovered that without the stamp, he could not find work, and without work, he would rise to the top of the military draft list again in the near future. The military commission has advised him that should he again refuse military service at the next call up, he is likely to receive an 11-year prison sentence.

15. (C) Ashyrgeldyev expressed his heartfelt opinion that he was doing the right thing in refusing compulsory service, and had no regrets about his role in the Jehovah's Witnesses effort to press the government here to allow conscientious objectors to serve their country in a non-military capacity. He was regretful, however, that he is not able to work to support his family. His only work option right now is in some private commercial capacity, but so far has found nothing.

16. (C) He and Zhbanov both asserted that members of their organization have seen very little change in the government's treatment of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Members are still hassled for attempting to proselytize, carrying religious literature, or meeting at a private home. Zhbanov showed little interest in the news that two evangelical christian groups have been registered in the last two months (refs B

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and C), and said the group did not want to be registered because it perceived that there would be more disadvantages than advantages associated with the status. He claimed the government strongly disliked the group because it was "too large and too well-organized".

17. (C) COMMENT: Although the government is gradually becoming more willing to register religious groups, this meeting reinforced the perception that there is still much room for improvement. The Jehovah's Witnesses may be a difficult group to find an accommodation with for a society and government where tradition and control are very important. The tenet of conscientious objection, unwillingness to recognize earthly governments, and the practice of active proselytization are difficult to accept in a traditional Muslim society that still has strong Soviet overlays. The Jehovah's Witnesses' decision to not seek registration probably guarantee that the church and officials will remain in conflict. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND